



# Mountain Poverty in the Hindu Kush–Himalayas

Regional analysis for Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, China, India, Myanmar, Nepal, and Pakistan

More than 60 million people live in poverty in the mountain areas of the Hindu Kush–Himalayan (HKH) region (excluding China and Myanmar), and almost one-third of the population in the mountains lives below the poverty line, compared to about one-quarter of the population of the countries as a whole.

Approximately 211 million people reside in the greater Himalayan region, but until now cohesive information on their socioeconomic status has been lacking, and differences between national and mountain poverty rates, and the reasons for them, have not been clear. To examine the complex characteristics of mountain poverty, ICIMOD has carried out an extensive analysis on the specificity of mountain poverty across the eight member countries of the HKH (Figure 1). The results are published in the regional report 'Understanding Mountain Poverty in the Hindu Kush–Himalayas'. Some of the key observations are presented here.

## Measuring Mountain Poverty

ICIMOD analysed nationally representative livelihood data for Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal, and Pakistan and used secondary data for China and Myanmar. In all six countries, the data were used to identify differences in poverty between different regions of the country, to identify differences within the mountain regions of the same country, and to explore the contribution of different determinants of poverty within the mountain and non-mountain areas. Poverty was measured by total per capita consumption. The methodology used to construct poverty lines for all six countries was the cost of basic needs (CBN) approach. Differentiation between food and non-food items was considered in some countries where relevant data were available.

Figure 1: The Hindu Kush–Himalayan region and study area

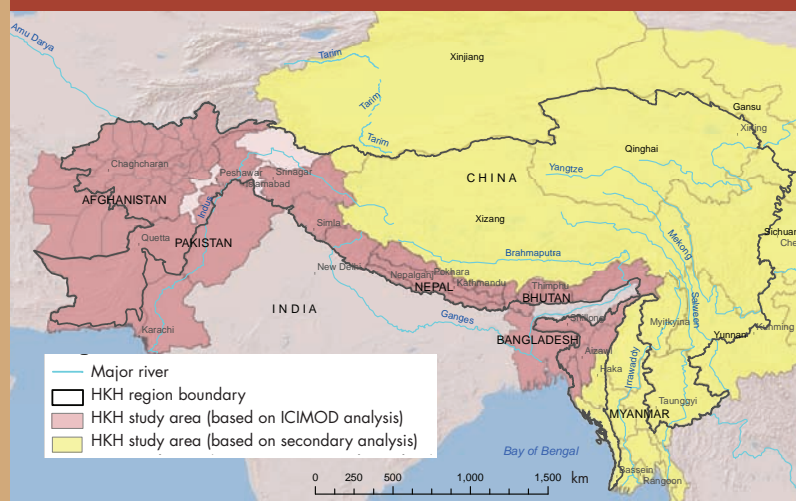
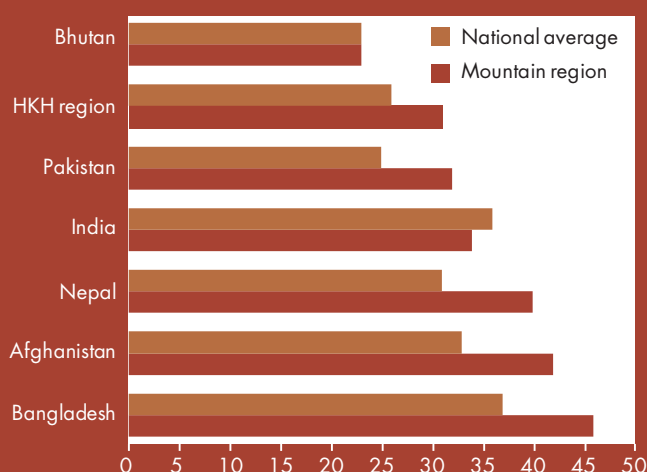


Figure 2: Population below the poverty line in countries of the Hindu Kush-Himalayan region (%)



Source: ICIMOD analysis based on NLSS 1995/96, 2003/04; BLSS 2007; NSS 2003; NRVA 2007/08; PLSM 2005/06; HIES 2005/06 datasets

### Mountain Poverty is Higher

In all cases except India, poverty rates were found to be higher in the mountain areas (Figure 2). On average 31% of the HKH population (excluding China and Myanmar) was below the poverty line compared to 26% of the population of the countries as a whole. Bangladesh had the highest proportion of poor people in the mountain areas (46%), followed by Afghanistan (42%), Nepal (40%), India (34%), Pakistan (32%), and Bhutan (23%).

Trend analysis for Nepal showed that poverty in the mountain areas tends to be persistent. Poverty reduction rates in the mountain areas were half those in the plains, meaning that the socioeconomic gap between mountain and non-mountain populations is growing. Higher and more persistent poverty in the mountains has contributed to increasing social inequality in Nepal.

### Mountain Poverty is Different

In all of the countries, determinants of poverty were different in the mountain areas than in the plains (Figure 3). Determinants of poverty that are specific to mountains – lack of access to basic facilities, poor accessibility, and household composition – were significant contributors to poverty in most of the study areas. Household composition played a significant role in explaining poverty especially in the mountain areas of Afghanistan and rural Himalayan West Bengal (both 48%), closely followed by the mountain areas of Bangladesh (46%) and Pakistan (42%). This determinant also had a

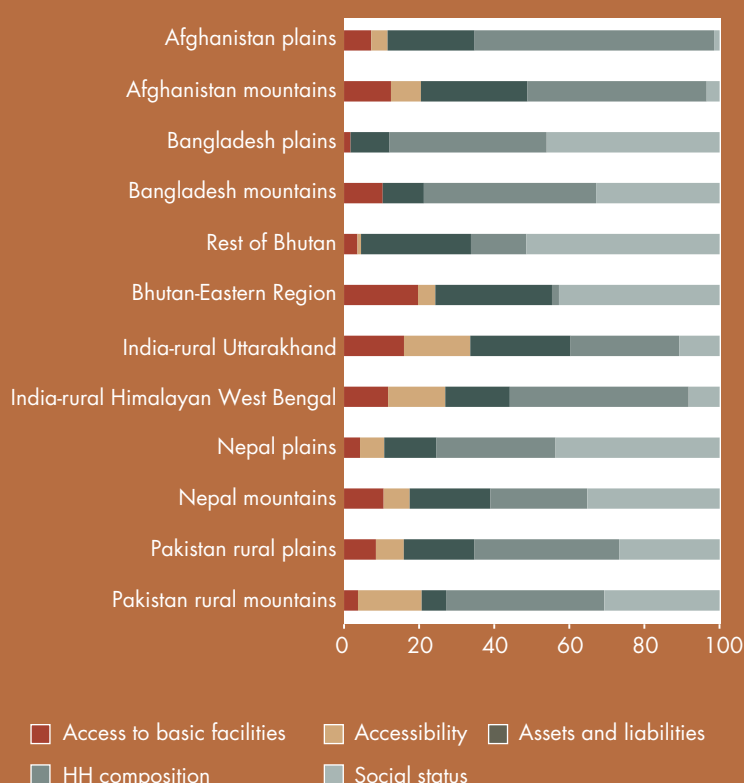
significant impact on poverty in rural Uttarakhand (29%) and the mountains and hills of Nepal (25%). To address poverty in mountain areas, attention must be drawn to the nature of mountain specific determinants of poverty

### Differences Within Mountain Areas

Considerable differences in poverty rates were also observed among different regions within the mountain system of each country. The findings for Pakistan (Figure 4), for example, illustrate the disparities. Kalat and Zhob had almost twice the proportion of households living below the poverty line (58 and 60% respectively) as the mountain average (32%) and close to four times the proportion in the best-off division, Hazara (15%). In order to target poverty alleviation strategies accurately, it is necessary to consider the disparities in poverty rates among different areas.

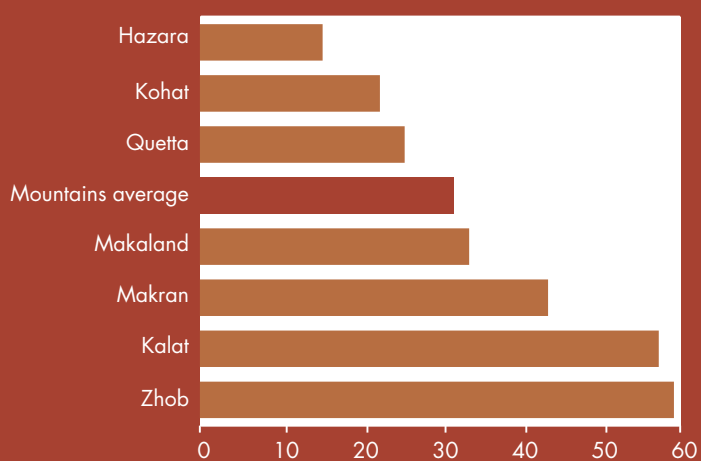
The impact of the different determinants of poverty also differ among the mountain areas (Figure 3). For example, household composition is an important determinant of poverty in almost all HKH countries. Another example is social status, which is of substantial relevance to the poverty of most of the HKH countries but is less relevant for the Indian Himalayan region. These findings

Figure 3: Regional comparison of the impact of different determinants of poverty (%)



Source: ICIMOD analysis based on NLSS 1995/96, 2003/04; BLSS 2007; NSS 2003; NRVA 2007/08; PLSM 2005/06; HIES 2005/06 datasets

Figure 4: Population living in poverty within the mountain region of Pakistan (%)



Source: ICIMOD analysis based on PSLM 2005/06 datasets

Lower access to basic facilities was a common determinant of poverty in all of the study areas except Pakistan. This confirms that high levels of remoteness and low levels of public and private investment are linked with a high incidence of poverty. In many remote areas, low population densities drive up the costs of extending physical infrastructure and providing basic services such as electricity and drinking water.

Poor accessibility was also a determinant of poverty in all areas except Rural Himalayan West Bengal. Inadequate physical infrastructure restricts access to markets and results in political, social, and economic marginality. Thus the link between poverty and inaccessibility is associated with limited economic opportunities due to lack of infrastructure and connectivity to wider markets. Poor infrastructure is a common characteristic of the poorest areas in the HKH region.

highlight the need to understand the location-specific constellation of determinants of poverty in order to design corresponding poverty alleviation strategies.

### Mountain-Specific Determinants of Poverty

Similarities among the findings for the seven study areas (in six countries) were examined in order to identify specificities of mountain poverty. The Table summarises the most prominent of the five dimensions of poverty in each study area (marked with X). It demonstrates that lack of access to basic facilities and poor physical access are the strongest determinants of poverty in mountain regions. These determinants are especially prominent in mountain areas (see Figure 3), whereas others – household composition, socioeconomic status, and assets and liabilities – are also relevant in non-mountainous areas.



### Mountain specific determinants of poverty

	Access to basic facilities	Accessibility	Assets and liabilities	Household composition	Social status
Afghanistan mountains	X	X	X		
Bangladesh mountains	X	n.a.			X
Eastern Bhutan	X	X		X	X
Rural Uttarakhand	X	X	X		
Rural Himalayan West Bengal	X			X	X
Nepal mountains and hills	X	X		X	
Rural Pakistan mountains		X	X		

Source: ICIMOD analysis based on NLSS 2003/04, BLSS 2007, NSS 2003, PSLM 2005/06, HIES 2005/06, NRVA 2007/08 datasets

## Conclusion

Empirical findings show that poverty is higher in mountains and has different causes than poverty in other geographic areas within the same country. While many factors leading to poverty are common to all geographic regions of a country – household composition, socioeconomic status, and assets and liabilities – others, particularly lack of access to basic facilities and poor physical access, are especially prominent in mountain areas. These findings provide substantial evidence of the urgent need for mountain-specific policy and development planning to address poverty in mountain areas.

The mountain people of the HKH often remain at the periphery of socioeconomic and geopolitical opportunities and live at the margins of society. Therefore, poverty will remain comparatively prevalent among people living in remote mountain areas, even if the Millennium Development Goal of halving poverty by 2015 is largely achieved at the national level. The higher rates of poverty and lower rates of poverty reduction in the mountains are a serious concern in terms of inequalities within nations and in the region as a whole. The effect of increased inequality can result in unsustainable upstream-downstream linkages such as increased outmigration and pressure on already overburdened urban centres, as well as structural and political conflict.



## Understanding Mountain Poverty in the Hindu Kush–Himalayas

Regional report for Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, China, India, Myanmar, Nepal and Pakistan

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68 pp

ISBN 978 92 9115 212 4

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Also available in electronic form at

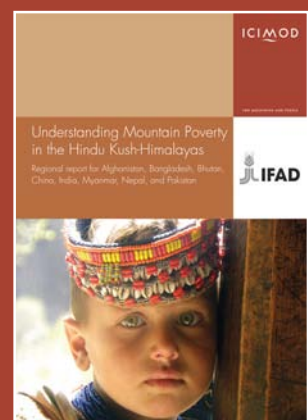
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Prepared by ICIMOD Publications Unit, January 2012